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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief survey of several contemporary macro-issues in human work organizations as context for--and part of the work of--scientists-practitioners in organizational communication. A special attempt has been made to identify concerns or issues--called "TransIssues" for the purposes of this paper--that appear to cut across two kinds of boundaries: the traditional nation-states and the new nation states--the transnational organizations and other alliances that superimpose themselves on the mosaic of countries and geographs. Eight TransIssues are dealt with in the paper. They are: (1) Changes in the Workforce; (2) Supervision, Management, and Leadership; (3) Product and Service Quality; (4) Technology; (5) Concern for the Natural Environment; (6) Emerging Alliances and Consortia; (7) Workplace Wellness; and (8) Crises in the Management and Operation of Contemporary Work Organizations. The paper concludes by pinpointing some "other TransIssues" as key world-wide forces which will shape the world of work in the future. (SR)

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CONTEMPORARY MACRO-ISSUES IN HUMAN WORK ORGANIZATIONS - AGENDA FOR THE SCIENTIST-PRACTITIONER IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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I want to spend some time sketching several, illustrative contemporary macro-issues in human work organizations as context for -- and part of our work as -- scientist-practitioners in organizational communication.

For our purposes here, I've tried to identify concerns or issues that appear to cut across two kinds of boundaries. The first are the boundaries of the familiar nation-states in the America's, Europe, Asia, the Pacific Rim, Africa, etc. The second boundaries are the evolving, fluid ones among the "new nation-states" - transnational companies and other work organizations and alliances that superimpose themselves on the mosaic of countries and geographs.

The macro work-issues that transcend the two kinds of boundaries I'll call, as a sort of shorthand, "TransIssues". TransIssues are both trans-national and trans-organizational.

The TransIssues which I've selected here grow out of a very broad review of contemporary issues in human work organizations. My objective was a kind of stock-taking which each of us does periodically in order to make sure that our research and practice stays connected to the concerns that workers, including ourselves, have in the world of work. I needed to update my framework for asking just what it is that we bring to the table as we try to contribute to resolving issues and creating a better world-of- work. The researcher-scientist in me wanted to think again about the relevance of paradigms, theories, constructs, and methods in the context of the contemporary issues and concerns. The practitioner in me was seeking to check the relevance and applicability of my approaches and techniques for intervention and change agency. Part of me was trying to reconfigure our repetoire of approaches and make them responsive to the issues. Part of me was trying to address the issues with fresh and, if possible, original ideas and techniques.

In the end, I drafted several lengthy chapters of a dialogue with myself ! Selections from that dialogue are excerpted here.

Remarks presented at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association, Miami, Florida; May, 1992. Dr. Keenan is Professor of Human Communication and teaches in the areas of Organizational Communication, Industrial/Organizational Psychology, and Management at Fairfield University.

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Not intending to be comprehensive, I'll limit my remarks to eight [8] sets of TransIssues:

- TransIssue #1 -- CHANGES IN THE WORKFORCE[S]
- TransIssue #2 -- SUPERVISION, MANAGEMENT, AND LEADERSHIP
- TransIssue #3 -- PRODUCT AND SERVICE QUALITY
- TransIssue #4 -- TECHNOLOGY
- TransIssue #5 -- CONCERN FOR THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
- TransIssue #6 -- EMERGING ALLIANCES AND CONSORTIA
- TransIssue #7 -- WORKPLACE WELLNESS
- TransIssue #8 -- CRISES IN THE MANAGEMENT AND OPERATION OF CONTEMPORARY WORK ORGANIZATIONS

TransIssue 1 - Changes in the Workforce[s]:

Workforce issues reflect world-wide changes in workforce demographics, workforce characteristics, worker expectations, work-ethics, and workforce abilities.

Trans-nationally and trans-organizationally, there is concern for the size of the workforce, in particular, the numbers of people entering and remaining in the workforce. The concern varies among countries: in the United States and Japan, the concern is heightened -- over the fewer number of younger entrants and the increasing number of older workers [relative to previous age cohorts]. There is less concern over such matters in Latin America, Korea, and Australia. Everywhere, the size of the workforce is tied both to economic growth and to organizational productivity.

Changes in the gender and the majority-minority mixes in the workforces around the world are important TransIssues. Increasing numbers of women, especially women with children, have been entering the workforce in the United States, in Japan, and in Europe. And the representation in the workforces of racial and ethnic minorities in many populations has been changing. Both of these changes present issues, frequently very urgent and dramatic, of worker acceptance, "glass ceilings", bias and discrimimation, workplace and family stresses, education and skill, assimilation and integration, and societal change.

The changing skill levels in the entry-level worker and changing values, attitudes and motivations among existing workers are prime concerns across organizations. In part, these concerns are related to the gender and minority-majority mixes in various national and organizational populations. In the United States, for example, about a third of entry-level workers are young people who have been raised in poverty and were ill-served by the school systems. Concerns in the United States about the relative illiteracy of entry-level workers are exacerbated by expectations that virtually all future work in such societies [and in organizations working in such societies] will require increased levels of literacy and skills.

In addition to the attitudes, motivations, and values accompanying workforce demographics, there is evidence for trans-national and trans-organizational increases in workers' desire for autonomy, differently meaningful work and life experiences, balance between work and family life, and involvement in decisions about work. In several societies and transnational organizations, there has been and continues to be a sense of entitlement with respect to work and economic security. Various forces are conspiring to make issues of the changing values, motivations, attitudes, and expectations of people already in the workforce of countries and transnational organizations. In some areas, such as in Korea, Japan, and Germany, changes in employee work values are pronounced and are of greater concern than elsewhere, for example, in Latin America.

TransIssue 2 - Supervision, Management, and Leadership:

I don't want a managerial bias to these remarks, but supervision, management, and leadership must be considered a second [2nd] TransIssue. Management/leadership issues are reciprocal with changes in the organization and concommitants of work around the world.

In part because of changing workforces, workplaces, and work cultures, and in part also because of urgencies in competition, productivity, and economic survival, work organizations are focusing on the dynamics of supervision, management, and leadership. The roles and tasks involved in influencing the direction and work of others is further complicated by the globalization of business structures and the globalization of the economy.

New challenges and agenda for supervising, managing, and leading are provided in the wake of recent restructurings, mergers, acquisitions, and multinational alliances. The ability to manage change [with its increased scale, scope, and speed] within tightened cost controls and other restrictions, and the ability to develop communication, consensus, and commitment in work staffs, are viewed as key characteristics in the successful contemporary manager.

Hopeful attention is being paid to various dimensions of managing and leading, for example: personal characteristics [traits, profiles, etc.]; selection, training, and development; managerial careers; leadership as added-value; reward structures; power and empowerment; and followership. Concern about the ends and goals of leadership is also part of the overall issue: the role of leaders in providing for ethical and humane work experiences and work cultures. Across organizations and world cultures, it seems clear that the leadership issue is important.

TransIssue 3 - Product and Service Quality:

Product and service quality issues obtain from emerging and highly competitive organizational refocusing on markets, consumers/users/guests, and product/service performance, features, reliability, aesthetics, and perceived quality.

A world-of-work issue that cuts across organizations and nations is competitiveness: both nations and organizations need to become and remain competitive with their counterparts. I will later mention some of the changes in organizational structure and functioning that are related to competitiveness: downsizing, merging, flattening, leaning, de-layering, decentralizing, team-development, work re-design, etc. But, several additional forces are also in play across organizations and nation-states. One of these is focusing on markets and customers/users/guests. Prodded by competition, satisfying customers and product/service quality is a trans-organizational, trans-national concern. Organizations and nations with high-quality products are working hard to maintain what has become their strong competitive edge. Other organizations and nations are striving to match or exceed the characteristics of the benchmark organizations and products/services. The increasingly global concern for customer satisfaction and product/service quality has a second dimension: identifying and focusing on the characteristics and interplay of participants ["stakeholders" such as suppliers, communities, franchisees, distributors, professional groups. etc.] in the "system" of entities and relationships that is the modern work enterprise. Concern for product/service quality has also a third [and threefold] thrust: [a] emphasis on knowing about the perceptions and expectations of the customer/user/guest; [b] refreshed and upgraded programs for training, developing, and motivating workers; and [c] imaginative interventions for creating work cultures organized yet flexible enough to deliver quality products and services to both the internal and end-user customers.

TransIssue 4 - Technology:

Technology issues for and in organizations derive from sweeping changes in the scale, scope, and interplay of technologies, from the blurring of distinctions among technologies [for example, among mass communication, telecommunication, and microprocessor technologies], and from intense competition in bringing new technologies to market.

Technology is at once the product, producer, and part of the process of organization and work. All work organizations affect and are affected by many and various "techno-logics", that is, understandings concerning how work goals are accomplished. Common to all techno-logics is some understanding of tools and circumstances. So-called "low technology" organizations focus on manual, people and animal intensive approaches and processes. "High technology" organizations are characterized by automation, capital intensive approaches, and, often, cutting-edge processes, staffs, and devices [e.g., office automation, "electronic-teams", videoconferencing, teleworking, virtual reality technology].

The reciprocal relations among technologies and work organizations are, increasingly, a trans-organizational macro-issue. Technology, as with any TransIssue, becomes an "issue" when the viability of the organization and/or its goods and services is - or could be - seriously affected. Technology is related to key aspects of the work organization: to the health and work performance of individuals and groups; to management, communication, and control; to the organizational culture; to productivity; to competitiveness; and to the condition of the physical environment.

There is a deep and growing trans-organizational concern for all of these relationships. And for the advantages and promise as well as the problems and hazards of technological development, for example, about techno-stress and the safety and health of a great variety of machine operators. The concern for the hazards of video-display terminals and poor ergonomic arrangements in computer-based workplaces illustrates this point. Some technologies, for example, microprocessor and telecommunication technologies, infomate, educate, and empower individual workers and groups. Managements in many organizations affect and are affected by information technologies and especially by information as commodity. Highly and successfully competitive organizations are more and more characterized by developing and moving new technologies to market quickly [staying competitive is a major concern in Japan, the United States, and in Europe; becoming competitive through technology is a major concern in Mexico and Brazil]. Some technologies adversely affect the natural environment [environmentalists world-wide are concerned - and are forcing organizations to be concerned - about this macro-issue].

TransIssue 5 - Concern for the Natural Environment:

Environmental issues derive from the increased trans-national and trans-organizational awareness and initiatives about preserving and protecting the natural environment and from the pressures of the Green Movement worldwide on institutions, organizations, and governments.

Arguably, work organizations and the natural environment have not mixed well. Some organizations have protected and preserved to some extent the natural environment, e.g. through reforesting, reclaiming land, and safeguarding water resources. An increasingly powerful, politicized voice, however, is accusing many work organizations of wanton disregard for and active, selfish harm to the natural environment. There seems no escaping the scrutiny of organi- zations of many different types and in many different places. Managements, employees, stockholders, communities, and other stakeholders are importantly affected. The global interplay of work [and governmental] organizations complicates both the problem and potential solutions.

TransIssue 6 - Emerging Alliances and Consortia:

Emerging alliances and consortia, both inter-national [e.g., the Pacific Rim nations, EC'92, and the North American Free Trade Zone] and inter-organizational [e.g., G.E.-Tungsram], create issues and challenges for organizations.

Work organizations have long been involved in cartels, trading blocks, joint ventures, and various contracted relationships and alliances. Many organizations are, however, challenged by contemporary developments in world politics and economy, for example, by the European Community. The EC is both a political and an economic changing of long-established European work arrangements, cultures, and organizations. But its influence is not limited to Europe: work organizations elsewhere will, of course, co-operate and compete - and change - with the work organizations in the EC. Mergers, acquisitions, and alliances involving different organizations in different parts of the world, such as GE and Tungsram [in Hungary] or McDonnell- Douglas and the Republic of China [Taiwan] challenge many aspects of the several ingredient organizational cultures: their cosmologies and histories, sense and uses of time and space, values, beliefs, heroes and legends, groups and tribes, communication networks, patterns of acculturation, languages and symbols, behavioral norms, work orientations [e.g., market vs clan], work motivations and reward structures, worker training and development, and leadership styles.

TransIssue 7 - Workplace Wellness:

For various reasons, the workplace is increasingly a center of concerns about worker health, welfare, job-related stresses, and other aspects of a healthy social ecology. Workplace well-ness is a seventh [7th] TransIssue.

Concern about the relationship between work and family/personal life has been heightened in recent years by changes in the composition and values of many workforces, in particular, by the increased participation of women with children, the increased number of dual-worker families, and the aging of some workforces [e.g., in the United States and Europe]. As a result, many work organizations have been moved to include or change programs for parental leave, dependent care, flexible working hours, work locations and conditions, and employee/family assistance.

Everywhere, stresses within and outside the work environment are common. The concomitants of stress in the individual worker are usually physiological, psychological, and behavioral. Poorly managed worker stress frequently includes substance abuse, absenteeism, turnover, accidents, injury, poor productivity, material waste, and dysfunctional group performance. Successful litigations in the United States and European countries have resulted in sizable benefits for injuries resulting from worksite stress. Work organizations have a high financial interest in reducing the costs of stresses in the workplace and in managing and promoting the safety and welfare of workers.

Mentioned earlier, workplace design, work practices, and technology are also potential aspects of stress and injury for a variety of workers in a variety of settings. This is the arena for ergonomics and organizational attentiveness to the design of people-workplace interfaces and the training of workers in safe behaviors and health at work.

Health issues in the workplace are, according to some, increasing toward crisis levels. The financial and other impacts on organizations are growing: the containment of injury and stress and the promotion of health maintenance, healthcare use, and health recovery are urgent agenda.

TransIssue 8 - Crises in the Management and Operation of Organizations:

Other issues flow from contemporary and predicted crises in work organizations and their cultures. These issues are brought about by dramatic political developments, emerging changes in work ethics, and economic conditions.

Recent history includes dramatic changes in the context and organization of human work. Our times may have been marked "Subject to Change without Notice" -- but, surely, change has been most noticeable! For both leaders and followers, the scale, scope, and speed of change has been a dramatic issue.

Entire nation-states such as East Germany and the Soviet Union have ceased to exist. Other countries, as in eastern Europe, have been very much changed. And with them, their worlds of work.

Work organizations around the world have been, not unexpectedly, evolving. With increasing frequency and scale, however, these evolutions have also been dramatic - bordering sometimes on upheavals. Organizational mergers and acquisitions, downsizings and failures, among transnational work organizations as well, have been very noticeable. Mergers, acquisitions, and down-sizings are almost always accompanied by very critical issues, for example: changes in management style, employee loss of identity, workforce anxiety, loss of talented staffs, family stresses. Downsizing seems also to be accompanied by crises in the morale, value, and expectations of middle-managers. The "blended organization" that seems the goal of a merger or acquisition involves many of the problems and agenda of the blended family in society.

Although the foundations and frameworks appear to differ somewhat among cultures, ethics in managing and operating the contemporary organization is an urgent and growing concern.

Reorganizing to be flatter, leaner, fewer-layered, decentralized, multidivisional ["M-form"], ethical, and more conpetitive, many work organizations are, indeed, changing. These changes are both trans-organizational as well as trans-national. And, as we said earlier, many organizations are restructuring the focus of work [e.g., on quality, customer-service, excellence] and the process of work [e.g. through self-managed work teams, just-in-time production]

Other TransIssues:

What areas of issues in the world of work have we not touched upon ?

Organizational futurists might add several key world-wide forces shaping the world of work.

General developments in the world's population [birth rates, disease, longevities] might be added as an area in which certainly there are additional issues and implications for work organizations. Trends in the world's food and energy supplies might be another area of issues. Developments in science and technology and their relations to society and organizations are important to monitor: all the technological knowledge of today will be only a very small percentage of that which will be available in the very near future !

Education-related trends might be added: world-wide efforts for literacy, educational reforms and perestroika, major changes in higher education, etc. Additional issues related to the world economy might be added to our list including, for example, the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, indebtedness and its influence on work organizations, and new roles for the most industrialized nations.

War and revolution is certainly a trans-national and trans-organizational issue with implications for work organizations. Possibilities for new strategic international military alliances, increased brushfire and regional conflicts, and the rise of terrorist states might be considered. And developments in international government and alignments [new loose political confederations, peace-keeping by international agencies, continued impacts of the information revolution, etc.] might also be added to our list of trans-national and trans-organizational macro-issues.

This then has been a brief survey of macro-issues -- TransIssues that cut across traditional nation-states and organizations [the "new nation-states"] -- that appear to me as contemporary context for, and part of, our work in organizational communication.